

# A STORY HE DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW

**James Bacque was researching the saga of a French Resistance hero when he stumbled on evidence of the Allied death camps. It took three years for him to believe it**

**H**e was not looking forward to meeting Herr Goertz, or, for that matter, even setting foot on German soil. His father had been gassed, not fatally, at Ypres during the Great War, and that was probably the beginning of Jim Bacque's hatred of all things German — a hatred reconfirmed as he grew from child to young adult during World War II. As a liberal intellectual of fifty-some years, he knew that this hatred was irrational, but he could have kept on living with his flaw. And would have, had sheer professionalism not driven him to meet Hans Goertz in his suburban Bonn town house in March, 1986.

*photograph James Bacque*



**Bacque (right) found his first clue among the papers of Raoul Laporterie (centre), a French Resistance hero**

Just a month before, Bacque, an acclaimed Toronto novelist (*Big Lonely, The Queen Comes to Minnicog, A Man of Talent*), had set up shop (so to speak) in a small town in the Bordeaux region of France. His intention was to produce his first "big international book" on the wartime resistance exploits of a man named Raoul Laporterie, who had single-handedly saved more than 1,500 French Jews. Bacque was accompanied by his research assistant, Jessica Daniel, daughter of his wife's first cousin and a (then) out-of-work young filmmaker. Daniel spoke perfect French, and could manage in German. They rented a villa in Grenade-sur-l'Adour, a town next door to Laporterie's and home of his personal archives. It was in those archives that they came across letters from Hans Goertz, about half a dozen in all, part of a large correspondence from people Laporterie had saved. But Goertz was not a Jew. Goertz was — or had been — a foot soldier in the *Wehrmacht*.

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They conscientiously contacted Goertz, and he agreed to see them. Speaking in French, with Daniel translating, Goertz told the story of how he had been captured by the Americans near Bonn, in the spring of 1945, and handed over to the French — shipped first to Rennes, a notorious (as Bacque and Daniel would discover) camp in Brittany, and then south to Buglose, in the Bordeaux region. Then he told of how Laporterie plucked him and another prisoner out of

**BY JOHN GAULT**

Buglose in the spring of 1946 and put them to work in his tailoring operation. The French, in the process of rebuilding their ravaged nation, were encouraged to use defeated German troops any way they saw fit; the camps, then, were set up as slave-labour pools — just as the infamous German camps had been. But Laporterie was not shopping for slaves. “As soon as I saw that man’s face,” Goertz said, “I knew I was saved.” Bacque thought Goertz was exaggerating. But after the tape recorder was turned off and the white wine was poured, Goertz leaned forward anxiously.

“Monsieur Laporterie is my friend,” he said. “I am saying that because he saved my life.”

“What did he save you from?” asked

# “**THAT’S ALL THEY REALLY NEEDED TO SUPPRESS: THE SCALE OF ATROCITY, THE TOTAL OF DEATHS, THE BIG NUMBER**”

Bacque, imagining a near-drowning or something similar.

“Twenty-five per cent of the men in that camp died in one month,” Goertz replied.

“What did they die of?” Daniel asked, and Goertz answered, “Starvation, dysentery, and disease.” Bacque automatically translated the percentage: at that rate, every prisoner in Buglose would have been dead in four months.

Goertz’s words had conjured an indelible image in Bacque’s mind — sick, hopeless men slumped on benches behind barbed wire — though surely, Bacque thought, it pertained only to one small camp in one small French village. Within weeks of the interview, however, Bacque had begun to think of the camp story as a possible chapter in his Laporterie book. His motives were not entirely pure: he’d been a publisher

before becoming a novelist, he knew that “scandalous revelations” sold books.

As soon as Bacque started to ask questions, he started to get ugly answers. A Buglose man named Jean Marc, for example, a boy when the camps were established, recalled prisoners tumbling dead out of boxcars when a train brought them from another camp, and others dropping and dying on the two-kilometre march between train station and barbed-wire enclosure. Buglose, then, had not been the only French camp where prisoners were maltreated. Spreading his net wider, Bacque collected more eyewitness accounts, from villagers, former camp guards, and any survivors he could trace.

Bacque always pressed his informants for the numbers: “The thing the Western mind loves, and uses to pull things together, is statistics.” Under his cross-examination, survivors (some from burial crews) and guards would estimate how many men had been in a given camp, and how many died there over, say, a month. Out came Bacque’s calculator. Uncannily, the annual death rate kept falling within a few points of thirty per cent. But harder statistics seemed impossible to come by. Despite intensive local searches, Bacque couldn’t discover how many prisoners Buglose — or any of the other five camps in the area — had officially held, or how many actual deaths had been reported. Files that should have held camp records were empty.

In April, Bacque and Daniel spent three days in the French Military Archives at Vincennes, a Paris suburb. They still had no luck in finding prisoner tallies but they did come upon some contemporary descriptions by horrified French officers and civilian leaders. The most shocking — “like Buchenwald,” “peopled with living skeletons” — concerned not camps in the Bordeaux region, or anywhere else in France, but a group clustered around Dietersheim, in West Germany, that in late July of 1945 had only just been turned over to the French. Before that, and from their inception, the Dietersheim camps, like 200 other camps in Germany, had been run by the Americans.

As it turned out, there had been reports in the Paris press (which Bacque eventually tracked down) about the desperate state of prisoners handed over to the French by the Americans. Ironically, Bacque first learned of these in a denial — a message from General Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme commander of the Allied forces — that he came across in May at the West German National Archives (Bundesarchiv) at Koblenz. He and Daniel also discovered here that most of the “official story” of what took place in

occupied Germany immediately after the surrender had been written for the Germans by the American military. When they asked for prisoner-of-war material, they were given photocopies of army documents sent over from Washington. “There was,” Bacque remarks, “a great deal to show what bastards the French were.”

Then Daniel came across a series of histories, commissioned in the 1960s by the West German government, that chronicled the fortunes of German prisoners in the two world wars. Four volumes dealt with Second World War prisoners and, from what she could decipher, said specifically of those taken by the western Allies that conditions were often difficult, but that the death rate was under two per cent — not much greater than that of the average town in peacetime. “My heart fell,” Bacque says. “I looked at these books, all done with Teutonic thoroughness, and I said to myself, you’ve been wasting your time.”

But because his German was nonexistent and Daniel’s merely adequate, and because the mortality rate flew in the face of his own findings, Bacque photocopied the relevant sections and sent them off to a friend in Frankfurt who was truly German-English bilingual. A few weeks later, when he got the translations, his suspicions were confirmed. According to Bacque, the author, Kurt W. Bohme, “quite plainly described, in anecdote and in narrative, all the conditions of an atrocity.” But then he stated baldly that no mass deaths had occurred, and supplied — unsupported by statistics — a death rate of under two per cent. Bohme had got his stories, of course, in pretty much the same way Bacque was getting his — by asking the people who’d been there. But where had he got his number? The answer to that came a few weeks later in Paris, when Daniel went out and made “one of our most important discoveries,” a typed report on the French handling of prisoners written by a French general named Buisson. As Bacque pored over the photocopy two things became obvious: first, Buisson’s manuscript had been Bohme’s source for the death rate; and second, the manuscript, which was apparently an internal government document, was not only self-serving but riddled with inconsistencies and worse.

From this point on, Bacque was convinced that there had been a deliberate cover-up, achieved in part by manipulation of the statistics so that no-one could put together a coherent picture of total deaths in relation to total POW populations. The scale of the die-off in the camps: “That’s the only thing they needed to suppress,” he points out. In fact, until he shifted his investigations to archives and libraries in the



United States, half a year after the Goertz revelation, Bacque was not even sure how many camps had been created in the French and American zones of Germany, plus France itself: the answer was about 1,800. Nor was he sure how many German prisoners had been rounded up: he was astounded to learn that the Western Allies had captured more than 9-million, of whom 5.25-million had been taken by the Americans in northwestern Europe. It was later still that he came upon another fact: about 1.7-million German soldiers were never accounted for after the war. In the West,

it had been convenient to blame the Russians. (The Iron Curtain foreclosed on any particular need to furnish proof.) But by the time he discovered the number, Bacque was already certain of a different fate for at least a million of the missing men.

**A**s August switched into September of 1986, Bacque and Daniel (her final appearance in the drama) drove down to Washington on what Bacque thought of as a fool's errand: perhaps he could find American confirmation of the atrocity he still thought of as mainly French. On the very first day of research in Washington, Bacque discovered "other losses."

At the United States National Archives on Pennsylvania Avenue, Bacque opened a file of reports titled HEADQUARTERS/UNITED STATES FORCES/EUROPEAN THEATER/G1 DIVISION which proved to be the U.S. Army's official weekly Prisoner of War and Disarmed Enemy Forces (DEF) ledgers for a short period in the autumn of 1945. They laid out, by military district, the number of prisoners on hand at the start of the week, the number acquired or transferred, the number discharged, and — before giving the closing balance — the number in one other category: OTHER LOSSES. Bacque had seen a similar expression in French documents: "Perdus pour Raisons Diverses." There wasn't much doubt in his mind that both phrases meant deaths. And the death rates? "I could do the numbers in my head. Roughly 5,000 POWs (OTHER LOSSES) in a week, that's about a quarter-million a year, and you look over to the

other side (PREVIOUS ON HAND) and you see there were about 700,000 on hand so life expectancy was under three years." Or an annual death rate of over thirty-three per cent. "And the line of totals above, the DEFs: 13,000 'other losses' in a week. The 370,000 guys in those camps would all be dead in less than eight months."

Bacque had accumulated evidence against the U.S. camps along the way, but had neglected it on the assumption that no scandal could possibly have been concealed, and that his evidence would be explained away somewhere in the record. With the discovery of OTHER LOSSES, however, his suspicions shifted and refocused on the Americans. The phrase itself became the title of his book.

Back in Toronto, Bacque started on the Laporterie manuscript (today completed and awaiting publication). At the same time, though, he began to follow through on an idea that had come to him in Washington. He had made a list of American officers who had been involved with postwar German prisoners. Now he began to write letters, sixty, eighty, a hundred letters. He shipped them in bundles to the U.S. Army's locator service. They brought only a handful of replies, but two would turn out to be of inestimable significance. The first led Bacque by a roundabout route to Colonel Ernest Fisher, a former senior historian at the United States Army Center for Military History who, as a young lieutenant, had served under the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, General Dwight Eisenhower. Bacque and Fisher

**Bacque assumed not only that the U.S. Army had behaved well in victory but that the Geneva Convention protected all Wehrmacht troops who surrendered**

first met in February of 1987, and, once presented with Bacque's evidence, the historian admitted that he wasn't surprised: no, he had never witnessed atrocities in the postwar camps, but he had always harboured suspicions. Calling up all his expertise, Fisher plunged into the project.

It was Fisher's research, in fact, that first began to implicate Eisenhower himself: a discovery of Eisenhower's initials on a cable dated March 10, 1945, proving he had probably drafted — certainly had full knowledge of — the proposal to redesignate German prisoners of war (protected by the Geneva Convention) as "disarmed enemy forces" (not protected). From this point, Bacque and Fisher found more and more evidence — initialled memoranda, cablegrams, minutes of meetings — that put the supreme commander (who openly despised Germans) in a position of knowing responsibility for the camps.

The second vital response to Bacque's inquiry letters arrived in Toronto while he was in Washington connecting with Fisher. It came from a retired colonel, Philip S. Lauben, who had actually been chief of the German Affairs Branch for SHAEF — Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force — in charge of repatriation of prisoners and transfers to the French. In March, Bacque met Lauben and unfurled his documents. "What does 'other losses'



HEADQUARTERS  
UNITED STATES FORCES  
EUROPEAN THEATER  
G-1 Division

Date 21 September 1945

MONTHLY PW & DEF REPORT

AS OF 2400 HRS. 8 September 1945

	PREVIOUS O/HAYD	GATS	DISBANDED DURING WEEK	DISCHARGED TO DATE	TRANSFERRED DURING WEEK	TRANSFERRED TO DATE	OTHER LOSSES	BALANCE ON HAND
EASTERN MIL. DISTRICT	263,582	18,712	13,200	1,514,207	1,619	17,201	6,532	260,943
WESTERN MIL. DISTRICT	97,751	28,825	4,564	244,243	- - - -	51,631	6,519	115,494 (1)
SGS (Prisoner Release)	2,253	18,858	927	2,495	18,066	122,590	- - -	2,118
TOTALS	363,587	66,395	18,691	1,761,350	19,685	191,422	13,051	378,555
DEF	692,895	2,696	- - - -	31,400	11,407	751,996	5,543	678,640

(1) Figures include:  
Military labor service units - 22,956  
Hospital cases - 41,387

\* - 107,748 discharged by 12 Apr formerly  
included, deducted from total previous  
report

Distribution:

General Evans  
Col. Lauben  
Col. Negrotto G-3  
Col. Griffin G-2 USEET (Main)  
Major Lustig, G-1 USEET (Rear)  
OTCQW TSJET (REAR) APO #887

Information Control Division, USEET (Main)  
SGS, State Section, USEET (Main)  
G-3 War Room, USEET (Main)  
G-4 War Room, USEET (Main)  
Major McCann, G-2 USEET (Main)  
OTCQW TSJET (MAIN) APO #757

Capt. Truelock, Army Gd Div, USGCC  
Theater Provost Marshal, Hq TSJET,  
APO 537, U.S. Army  
Att: Chief of PW Div.  
File.

mean?" Bacque asked as they reached that subheading. It was a crucial question. The ledgers were hard evidence — but only if his assumption could be verified.

"It means deaths and escapes," Lauben said.

"How many escapes?" Bacque asked.

"Very very minor," Lauben replied. Less than one in 1,000, Bacque would eventually learn.

Lauben went on to confirm as much of Bacque's research as he had direct knowledge of, and that was a great deal. At the end of the day, he said wearily, "The shit is really going to hit the fan now."

In fact, though, the quest was not over. A challenge from a doubting historian whose imprimatur Bacque had sought forced him to admit that he needed more than a single "smoking gun." And he found one.

In a depot of the National Archives in Suitland, Maryland, in a room so packed that his shoulders brushed shelves on each side as he eased down the aisles, Bacque found two tables reprinted from a medical survey of 80,583 German prisoners held in U.S. camps along the Rhine in the period May-June, 1945. One table, incomplete and lacking a total, ranked the chief causes of death from disease, by actual fatalities in the camps; the other extrapolated an annual death rate from all causes for the camps' population as a whole. Something

was wrong: the medical survey had been done over a six-week period, but this second table, too, gave no actual total of deaths for the six weeks — just the projection for the year in each category. The projection for deaths from disease, for example, was 2,754. Overall, the table yielded a death rate in the 3.5-per-cent-per-annum range.

That night, and for at least a fortnight thereafter, Bacque puzzled and pored over his photocopy of the report, suspecting the numbers had been fiddled to lower the death rate, but not certain how to prove it. His inspiration, when it came, was to subject the projected annual deaths to the most obvious form of backtracking: divide by fifty-two and multiply by six, to arrive at the number the doctors must originally have reported, that is, the actual deaths in the six-week period. He discovered, quite simply, that in no category could an authentic — whole — number have been the basis for the projection. How could the doctors have reported, for example, 317.76923 actual deaths from disease? The annual projection of 2,754 seemed to have been pulled out of the air.

In fact, it hadn't been. Bacque and Fisher later found a complete version of the first table: there had been 2,754 deaths from disease in the six weeks of the original survey. The proper projection for the year

Official DEF/POW balance sheet for the week ending September 8, 1945, shows the DEFs totalled by military district, the POWs appended as a separate tally

should have been just under 24,000 deaths — among just over 80,000 prisoners.

Bacque's quest took three years of his life and something like \$100,000 of his own money, besides costing him the old luxury of hating Germans — and some other illusions. Even though he scaled down his indictment of Eisenhower after Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose spent two-and-a-half days on a critique of his manuscript, the war hero and popular president still comes off badly. Which, Bacque believes, is the major reason why there has been no American sale of *Other Losses*. At this writing, *Other Losses* has only two publishers, one German and one Canadian.

As for Hans Goertz: when he learned that the story he told on that late winter night in 1986 had become more than an anecdote in the life of his friend, Raoul Laporterie, Goertz steadfastly refused to have anything more to say. Bacque's letters went unanswered, his telephone calls were refused. One March night, drinking white wine with Jim Bacque and Jessica Daniel and thinking back forty years, Goertz had called up his ugliest memory. For whatever reasons, he would not do so again.

document U.S. National Archives